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ABSTRACT

The authors argue that most current modes of formative and summative teacher evaluation are fundamentally unproductive. Unproductiveness stems from focusing upon efficiency rather than effectiveness, post rather than future performance, individual rather than organizational performance, and authoritarian rather than collegial relationships. Reversing these foci seems appropriate. Doing so, however, suggests reconceptualizing teacher evaluation in the broader framework of systems theory. In this light, evaluation is located within the internal adaptive sub-system and functions as the intelligence arm of the school system. (Author)

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Discovery or Defense:

Teacher Evaluation Re-conceptualized

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Of all the purposes for post-baccalureate teacher evaluation noted in the literature, the improvement of instruction (formative evaluation) and enhancing personnel decision making (summative evaluation) figure most prominently. (Notes 1,2). Both purposes imply dissatisfaction with some aspect of school operations, or, as Cronbach (1980) in the context of program evaluation asserts, signify "pathology in the political system (p. 4)." In classic decision theory, dissatisfaction triggers search behavior. But equally or more significant than search behavior per se is articulating the dissatisfaction in the form of a "problem" and subsequently framing "the question." In formative teacher evaluation, the problem is typically posed in the context of deficiency, and questions are framed within that context, e.g., "How can teacher X's classroom management skills be improved?" In summative evaluations, problems are usually framed within the context of termination, and these are largely posed within the boundaries of legal consideration, e.g., "What due process rights of teacher Y must be taken into account?" We shall argue in this paper that such problem definition and question framing predictably frustrates the manifest purposes of teacher evaluation. More explicitly, we shall argue that current models of evaluation are built upon mis-statements of the problem, ask the wrong questions, and, as a consequence, minimize rather than optimize the potential benefits of evaluation. To place this argument in context consider the following foreshortened but paradigmatic case of formative and summative evaluations.

Formative teacher evaluation as typically practiced consists of a core set of activities--classroom observation, the production of a document (typically a check list or rating scale), and a post-observation conference. This basic core may be augmented by a set of pre-observation preparatory activities and/or a set of follow up actions. Clinical supervision, the currently advocated mode of formative evaluation, elaborate these processes in some detail (Cogan, 1973). (Note 3) But whatever the variation, formative evaluation entails the gathering of detailed classroom observation data, assessing teacher behavior, making judgments about that behavior, and dealing face-to-face with the teacher on the basis of that data and corresponding set of judgments. All of this hopefully is conducted within a collegial, collaborative and ethical context for the purpose of improving instruction (Garman, 1982).

Summative teacher evaluation is invoked when crucial personnel decisions need to be made. Typically this occurs when (a) an initial tenure decision is required; (b) when exigencies arise that precipitate lay-off; and (c) when allegations (e.g., incompetence or moral misconduct) are made which could result in the termination of a tenured teacher. (Note 4) In the first and second instances, the outcomes of the process may be determined more by factors external to the teacher than performance per se. In termination cases the process seems to be driven primarily by the need to protect the organization from adverse legal action. Given current constitutional, statutory and contractual provisions regarding due process, such concern is understandable.

Where do these processes go wrong? Thoughtful critics have identified various weaknesses. Current evaluation practice is seen as psychologically threatening (Brock, 1981); as predicated upon an indefensible technology (Scriven, 1981); as costly and time consuming (Dornbusch & Scott, 1975); as lacking the essential grounding in research on teaching (McNeil and Popham, 1973); as dependent for execution on an untrained cadre of evaluators (Haefle, 1981), and so on. Each of these criticisms could be articulated at length. However, we shall focus attention elsewhere. In brief, we take the stance that current evaluation practices are ill-founded conceptually and operationally because: (1) they are efficiency rather than effectiveness oriented; (2) they focus upon past individual performance rather than future organizational performance; (3) they almost inevitably lead to adversarial rather than collegial/professional relationships; and (4) they are almost totally divorced from the broader staffing process. Some expansion on each of these criticisms is warranted.

In this context, efficiency refers to the relationship of inputs to outputs: effectiveness refers to the relationship between outputs and goals (Lindsay, 1982). The input of significance here is teachers. Formative evaluation focuses uniquely upon efficiency, i.e., improving instruction. Whether or not improvement has occurred is determined by assessing outputs. Outputs are of two kinds--changes in teacher behavior which are under direct control of the teacher, e.g., directing the flow of verbal interaction, and changes in student behavior. Teachers accept the former as a legitimate base for evaluation but, with some justification,

reject the latter (Quinto and McKenna, 1977). But in either case focusing upon the efficiency relationship begs the question of efficiency for what? It is theoretically possible for a system to be 100% efficient but have an effectiveness rating of 0. In education, the reverse is also possible (Stephens, 1967). In brief, true belief in the efficacy of formative evaluation diverts attention from effectiveness. In a classic case of goal displacement, means become ends, concern for process replaces concern for product. It is well to keep in mind that not every "Teacher of the year" receives tenure.

The second major weakness in current practice is its emphasis upon past individual performance. This is a natural derivative of two equally invalid assumptions: (1) the deficiency assumption, i.e., that the weaknesses which energize improvement efforts reside in the individual, and (2) that serial attention to individual deficiencies will automatically improve the functioning of the organization as a whole. Assumptions aside, the net effect of focusing upon individual performance is to bring to bear the entire weight of the organization on the individual. It is small wonder that teachers individually and collectively have sought, largely successfully, some modes of power equalization.

There are further dysfunctional consequences of attending primarily to past individual performance. First, it diverts attention from unit productivity present or future. Second, almost by default it imposes the efficiency criterion since any measure of effectiveness would have to take into account the contributions of large numbers of people. Third, it has the potential for establishing divisions within the professional staff, i.e., those judged competent (or nearly so) and those judged incompetent

(or nearly so). Invidious comparisons are invited. Cooperative and collegial relations among staff are sacrificed (Johnson, 1980).

The third weakness is closely related to the last point. Current practices easily generate adversarial relationships. Clearly, this is true in termination proceedings. Even in formative evaluation sides are drawn since evaluators are normatively pressed to find something in need of improvement and teachers are equally pressed to defend their behavior. When the expertness of the evaluator is suspect, the situation is exacerbated.

Finally, current systems of evaluation are flawed insofar as they appear to be totally divorced from the total staffing process. Performance evaluation is but one link in the chain of events which constitues that larger process (French, 1982). Personnel evaluation, properly conceived and executed, should provide feedback into each of the prior events--determining organizational objectives, designing the instructional system, conducting the job analysis, formulating job descriptions, determining job specifications and performance standards, recruiting, selecting and orienting staff, and the like. There is little evidence that present teacher evaluation practices are systemically related to those processes. And the absence of such systemic relationships has a number of dysfunctional consequences. First, it raises the greatest anxiety provoking element of the total process to the highest level of visibility. Second, potentially useful information obtained in the course of an evaluation tends to be under-utilized if utilized at all. Third, it leads to asking relatively trivial rather than powerful questions. There is, for example, limited power and pay-off in asking, "How can teacher Q improve classroom discipline?" Except in truly bizarre cases it would be more powerful to

ask, "How can the school staff establish a more productive learning environment for students?" Or to use another example, if there is serious question about an individual teacher's competency, it seems more productive to inquire about the processes that admitted that teacher to the system than to expend the total organizational effort on remediation. To use a medical analogy, prevention rather than prescription should be the primary concern.

The outlines of the re-conceptualization promised in the title of this paper should be fairly apparent by now. I say outlines because the details are not yet clear. In thinking through a re-conceptualization of personnel evaluation we have been strongly influenced by Cronbach and Associates (1980) Toward Reform of Program Evaluation. That work begins with 95 Theses some of which are germane to personnel evaluation. For example:

1. Program evaluation is a process by which society learns about itself.
2. Program evaluation should contribute to enlightened discussion of alternative plans for social action.
8. Ideally, every evaluation will inform the social system and improve its operation. . . .
26. What is needed is information that supports negotiation rather than information calculated to point out the "correct" decision.
58. Merit lies not in the form of inquiry but in revelance of information. . . .
93. The evaluator is an educator, his success is to be judged by what others learn. (pp. 2-11)

There is, of course, some danger in assuming a one-to-one correspondence between program and personnel evaluation, and in substituting the terminology generated in one context for another. It may, however, be instructive to do so as a way of re-orienting thinking about a phenomenon. Hence a re-written Thesis 1:

1. Teacher evaluation is a process by which the school learns about itself.

Such a thesis refocuses evaluation in two fundamental ways. First, the role of evaluation shifts from judging to data gathering; it serves as the organization's intelligence arm. In systems language this signals a shift in locus of task responsibility. Evaluation becomes a part of the adaptive subsystem rather than the reward and sanctioning/managerial subsystems. The second noticeable feature is a change in the unit to be evaluated and served. For Cronbach, the proper unit of evaluation is "society" (Thesis 1) or the "social system" (Thesis 8). In the present context the school, or the school system becomes the unit. In higher education the proper unit might be the department, the college, or the university as a whole. In brief, the focus of evaluation shifts from the individual to the larger collectivity, and evaluation becomes the means through which an organization assesses its "health" (Miles, 1965) and charts its future.

What might be the advantages of conceptualizing personnel evaluation in such fashion? There seem to be several beyond merit by default (i.e., others are worse). First, attention would be concentrated at the point where judgments are made by consumers, i.e., on unit effectiveness rather than individual efficiency. Second, such an approach would clearly reduce

present psychological threats to evaluatees and evaluators alike, and in the process generate a climate more conducive to discovery than defense. Third, it holds the promise of re-establishing the necessary relationship and balance among the various elements which constitute the staffing process. Fourth, it is more closely attuned to the reality of schooling where effects are more a function of joint rather than individual effort and where the present technology of teaching procscribes certitude. Fifth, it would take evaluators beyond narrow concerns related to the technology of measurement and/or due process. Sixth, evaluators, primarily principals, could discard the fiction of being expert in every aspect of school operations and legitimately distribute the responsibility for evaluation among the school staff. Seventh, a re-orientation of thinking such as that suggested might even free up enough energy to address the really important issues affecting education.

There is, of course, no direct evidence that what has been suggested will produce better results. No one has tried it. There is, however, some indirect evidence which is promising. The literature on effective schools (Mann, 1980) points in that direction, and it is of more than passing interest that that literature is conspicuously silent on the issue of teacher evaluation as we know it. Second, there is the management literature on MBO. Its emphasis on goal specification and goal achievement is consistent with the present proposal. Third, there are the favorable reports coming from the school improvement teams which have come into being. It may be that what has been proposed taps an underlying common dimension of those separate efforts.

In conclusion, consider again the title of the Cronbach and Associates book, Toward Reform of Program Evaluation. The emphasis is on reform, and in placing the emphasis on reform there is both an indictment of present practice and a more hopeful vision of the future. The present proposal is offered in the same spirit.

NOTES

1. The terms personnel evaluation and faculty evaluation are substitutable for teacher evaluation since the problems and issues are similar, if not identical, irrespective of organizational context.
2. Other purposes include complying with legal or institutional mandates, furthering research on teaching, responding to external demands for accountability, guiding student course and teacher selection, or to legitimate lay-offs in a period of declining enrollment.
3. The conceptual and operational distinctions among in-service professional development, clinical supervision, and formative evaluation are imprecise. The blurring of the three creates problems for practitioners and scholars alike.
4. The literature's silence on the use of summative evaluation in the promotion, demotion, or lateral transfer of teachers is deafening. What appears to be invoked is a set of highly informal mechanisms.

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